VÄXJÖ'S SILENT ARIA

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The air in Växjö was crisp. Golden leaves swirling in the autumn wind as Anna Karlsson stepped out of the sleek black taxi. Despite her age, she exuded the kind of elegance that could silence a room. Her perfectly tailored coat brushing against the cobblestone driveway of the Elite Stadshotellet. As one of the receptionists recognizing her hurried to assist her, she tilted her head slightly, her signature smile flashing briefly.

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice still carrying a melody that once captivated audiences across Europe.

Inside the lobby, Anna scanned the room. Her expression softened as she spotted Alma Hansson seated under a painting picturing the street outside a century back. Alma rose to her feet, her warm smile spreading across her face as she embraced her old friend.

"Anna! It's been too long," Alma said, pulling back to examine her friend. "You look..."

"Older," Anna interrupted, laughing lightly. "But so do you. Don't deny it."

Alma rolled her eyes. "Well, I don't have the luxury of designer gowns and a fanbase to keep me motivated. Come, let's sit. You must be tired."

They settled into plush armchairs, and a waiter promptly brought over a bottle of wine. Anna raised an eyebrow.

"Still the hostess, I see," she said, lifting her glass. "To old friends and new beginnings."

"To old friends," Alma echoed, though she couldn't help but notice the faint tremor in Anna's hand as she raised her glass.

Later and after Anna had the time to refresh Alma returned for an early dinner together. Over dinner at the hotel's restaurant, Anna seemed radiant, yet Alma sensed an undercurrent of sadness. Between bites of seared lamb and sips of Burgundy, Anna began to open up, though her stories were tinged with a bitterness Alma hadn't seen before.

"You know," Anna said, swirling the wine in her glass, "they called me 'The Nightingale of Stockholm.' Sold-out performances, standing ovations… But none of that matters when the lights go out."

Alma frowned. "You don't believe that, do you? You had a career most people only dream of."

Anna smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "And what did it bring me? A failed marriage, a fortune siphoned away, and…well, let's just say I've made some questionable decisions since."

"Magnus," Alma said softly, testing the waters.

Anna's grip on her glass tightened. "Magnus. The great love of my life and the reason I'll die penniless. He's the past now. Good riddance."

Before Alma could press further, Anna's demeanour shifted. She leaned back, flashing a mischievous grin. "Enough about me. Tell me about your life, Alma. Still happily married to the dashing Polisinspektör?"

"Dashing, yes. Happily married…most days," Alma replied with a chuckle. "Mikael's work keeps him busy, but we manage."

As the evening wore on, Anna's wine refills became more frequent, her laughter louder, yet her gaze often drifted to the window as though expecting someone—or something.

It was past midnight when Alma returned home to find Mikael still awake, reviewing case files at the dining table.

"How was your evening with the diva?" he asked, smirking.

"Complicated," Alma admitted, slipping off her coat. "Anna's…different. She's carrying something heavy, Mikael. I can feel it."

"Secrets and drama," Mikael teased. "Isn't that every opera singer's brand?"

Alma shot him a look. "I'm serious. She's been through a lot. Magnus, her career, and something else she wouldn't talk about. I don't know…" She trailed off, glancing at the clock.

1.

The shrill ring of the telephone jolted them both awake hours later. Mikael reached for it, his brow furrowing as he listened. Alma sat up, dread creeping into her chest.

"Alright, I'm on my way," Mikael said, hanging up.

"What is it?" Alma asked, though the look on his face told her everything.

"It's Anna. She's…dead." He said quietly.

"Dead?" Alma's voice cracked. "How? What happened?"

Mikael shook his head, running a hand through his hair. "They found her this morning; I don't know much... Murdered..." Mikael's voice was rough, strained.

Alma's breath hitched. " Murdered? By who?"

"I need to go, Alma."

"Of course," Alma whispered, reaching for his hand.

He turned and rushed out the door, leaving Alma alone in the quiet apartment, the weight of the news settling heavily on her chest. Anna, vibrant, full of life, gone. It seemed impossible.

As the hours passed, Alma tried to distract herself, but the image of Anna, lying lifeless in the park, kept intruding on her thoughts. Who would do such a thing? And why? Fear mingled with grief, a chilling reminder of the fragility of life and the darkness that lurked just beneath the surface of their seemingly peaceful world.

* * * * *

The Elite Stadshotellet was eerily quiet as Mikael arrived. A uniformed officer led him to Anna's room, where the door stood ajar, a policeman guarding outside the room. Inside, the scene was chilling: the once-cosy room now felt cold and sterile under the harsh glow of forensic lamps.

Anna lay on the bed, her lifeless body arranged unnaturally. The bruising around her neck and the indentation of a scarf told the grim story. A smashed wine bottle lay near the bed, the shards glinting like cruel stars. On the desk, a single note rested, the words scrawled in an unsteady hand: *"Meet me at midnight."*

"Strangulation," the medical examiner who had arrived minutes before Mikael muttered. "Judging by the bruising, the killer used gloves. No fingerprints yet."

Mikael's eyes scanned the room, noting the lipstick-stained glass and the torn scarf on the floor. Something about the scene felt staged, as though the killer wanted to send a message.

"Who found her?" he asked.

"Housekeeping. Came in this morning when she didn't answer her wake-up call." Mikael felt a bit lost between the dead body and the fact that he actually knew the victim.

Having left in a hurry, Mikael had to return home and change before heading for his office. He found Alma sat at the kitchen table, staring into her coffee

cup and it was the way she looked at him that somehow made him recount the details of what he had seen.

"Strangled? In her hotel room?" Alma whispered, her voice trembling.

"Whoever did this wanted to make it personal," Mikael said. "The scarf… the note... It wasn't random."

Alma hesitated before speaking. "Mikael, there's something you should know. Anna mentioned Magnus last night. She said he was the reason for all her troubles, but she didn't go into detail. Do you think...?"

"Magnus Ekström? Her ex...?" Mikael interrupted, scribbling the name in his notebook. "What do you know about him?"

"He was manipulative, controlling. She always said he destroyed her, financially and emotionally. But she also had a way of attracting trouble. There were younger men, flings, and her drinking… It was a lot."

Mikael leaned back, considering the implications. "If Magnus was still in her life, even indirectly, he'll have some questions to answer."

Soon after Mikael was back at the station, piecing together the fragments of Anna's life. A search of her financial records revealed large cash withdrawals in the weeks leading up to her death, raising suspicions of blackmail. Phone records showed multiple calls to an unregistered number, and a name began to surface in whispers among the team: Emil Nyström, a young aspiring singer who had been seen with Anna at the hotel bar.

Mikael's instincts told him this case was just beginning, and the deeper he dug, the more tangled the threads became.

As night fell over Växjö, Alma sat alone in her living room, the weight of Anna's death pressing down on her. The echoes of their last conversation replayed in her mind, fragments of Anna's cryptic words forming a haunting melody.

In the shadows of her home, Alma whispered to the emptiness, "What were you trying to tell me, Anna?"

2.

The morning light filtered through the blinds in Mikael Hansson's office, casting sharp lines across his desk. He sat staring at the sparse notes they had on Anna Karlsson's death, his mind running in circles. The media frenzy was already picking up steam; the "Nightingale Murder" was the top story on every local station. But the puzzle pieces weren't fitting together yet.

The soft knock on his door pulled Mikael from his thoughts. Alma stepped in, her face pale but composed.

"I know you're busy, Mikael, but I think I need to tell you more about Anna," she said, settling into the chair opposite him. "She deserves that much."

Mikael leaned forward, resting his elbows on the desk. Alma hesitated, wringing her hands. "Anna's life wasn't what it seemed. She told me last night how much she struggled after Magnus left her. He didn't just take her money... well ...he took her confidence. And she…she never really recovered. But I told you that yesterday..."

Mikael frowned. "We are talking about Magnus Ekström, the ex-husband, aren't we? I've never actually met him. Only heard of him and that mostly from you. What more do you know about him?"

"Not much, only what Anna shared. He was charming when they first met, a smooth-talking music producer. But once they were married, he became controlling, manipulative. She said he drained her bank accounts, sold off her properties, and then left her to pick up the pieces." Alma's voice dropped. "She still blamed him for everything, even years later."

Mikael nodded, jotting down notes. "Do you think he could have any reason to come back into her life? Money, perhaps?"

"Maybe," Alma admitted. "But Anna was also dealing with...other issues. After Magnus, she started drinking heavily. And she had this pattern of getting

involved with younger men. It wasn't love; I think it was her way of trying to feel wanted again."

Mikael tapped his pen against his notebook, his thoughts darkening. "Younger men. Any names?"

"Not specifically," Alma said. "But last night, when we were talking, she kept glancing at the bar. Like she was expecting someone to show up. That's what I didn't tell you Mikael..."

"Why?" He felt surprised. "I was ashamed of my friend..." Alma whispered and Mikael nodded understanding the sentiment. Some of his friend had often made him feel the same in the past.

After Alma left his office, Mikael decided to start with the Elite Stadshotellet. The hotel manager, a stout man with sharp eyes, met him in the lobby.

"Inspector Hansson, thank you for coming," the manager said, extending a hand. "Terrible business, what happened to Ms. Karlsson."

Mikael nodded curtly. "I need to see your security footage from last night. And I'd like to speak to your staff. Particularly anyone who interacted with Ms. Karlsson."

"Of course, of course," the manager said, leading Mikael to the security room.

The footage showed Anna entering the bar around 9 p.m., dressed in an elegant burgundy gown. She ordered a drink and took a seat at the far end of the counter. Thirty minutes later, a young man joined her, a striking figure in his mid-twenties, with sharp features and a restless energy.

"Do you know who he is?" Mikael asked the manager, pointing at the screen.

The man shook his head. "No, but I can find out. He wasn't a registered guest. Ms. Karlsson often requested privacy for her visitors, so we didn't question it."

The footage showed the man and Anna exchanging words. At first friendly, then heated. The man stood abruptly, knocking over his chair, and stormed out of the bar. Anna remained seated, her expression a mixture of anger and resignation.

"What time was this?" Mikael asked.

"Ten thirty-five," the manager replied.

"Did she return to her room after this?"

"Yes. Alone."

Mikael's next stop was the morgue. The sterile white walls and the faint smell of disinfectant greeted him as the medical examiner, Dr. Sigrid Wahlgren, handed him the preliminary report.

"The cause of death was strangulation," she said, gesturing to the body on the table. "The bruising patterns indicate a cord or a scarf, but the killer used gloves—no fingerprints."

Mikael examined the markings on Anna's neck, his stomach churning. "Any signs of a struggle?"

"None," Sigrid replied. "It's possible she knew her killer and didn't see the attack coming until it was too late. There's also something else."

She handed Mikael a small plastic bag containing a fragment of paper. "We found this in her hand. It's torn, but you can make out part of a phone number and the word 'danger.'"

Mikael's jaw tightened. "Have you been able to trace the number?"

"We're working on it," Sigrid said.

3.

Back at the station, Mikael's team was piecing together Anna's phone records. One number appeared repeatedly in the days leading up to her death. An unregistered prepaid phone.

"Burner phone," Mikael muttered. "Typical for someone trying to stay off the radar."

He turned to his colleague, Anders, the station's IT. "Anders, I need you to find out who owns that phone. It's our best lead right now."

Later the same evening, Alma called Mikael at the station.

"I remembered something," she said. "Anna mentioned someone named Emil. She didn't say much, just that he was...persistent. Do you think it's connected?"

"Emil," Mikael repeated, scribbling the name. "I'll look into it. Thanks, Alma."

He hung up and instructed his team to cross-reference the name Emil with known associates of Anna Karlsson.

By the next morning, Mikael had a name: Emil Nyström, a twenty-six-year-old aspiring singer who had recently performed at a local competition. Witnesses from the hotel bar confirmed that Emil was the man seen arguing with Anna.

Mikael tracked Emil to a modest apartment on the outskirts of Växjö.

The door opened to reveal a dishevelled Emil, his eyes bloodshot and his demeanour defensive.

"Police? What do you want?" Emil asked in a boorish way while standing at the door and crossing his arms in front of him

"I'm investigating the death of Anna Karlsson,"

Mikael said, stepping past him and into the apartment uninvited. "You were seen with her the night she died."

Emil paled. "I didn't kill her, if that's what you're thinking."

"Then explain why you were arguing with her at the bar," Mikael said, his voice sharp.

Emil hesitated, running a hand through his hair. "She owed me money. A lot of it. I've been trying to get her to pay me back for weeks, but she kept brushing me off."

"What kind of money are we talking about?"

"Fifty thousand kronor," Emil said bitterly. "She promised to help me with my career. She said she'd invest in my first album. But then she just...blew me off. I got angry, but I didn't hurt her. I swear."

Mikael studied Emil's face, noting the flicker of fear in his eyes. "Where were you after you left the bar?"

"I came home," Emil said. "Alone."

"Anyone who can confirm that?" Emil shook his head.

"Then, Mr Nyström, you are coming with us." Mikael said looking hard into the man's eyes.

Back at the station, Mikael was conflicted. Emil had motive, but his behaviour didn't scream "killer." The case was growing murkier, with more questions than answers.

As Mikael sifted through the evidence again, a new thought struck him: What if the murder wasn't about revenge or money? What if it was about silencing Anna?

He stared at the torn note from her hand, the word *danger* etched into his mind. Whatever Anna had been afraid of, it had found her.

4.

The bustling activity of the Växjö police station seemed muted to Mikael Hansson as he stared at the man across the interrogation table. Emil Nyström, a wiry young man with a shock of unkempt blond hair, sat slouched, avoiding eye contact. His fidgeting hands betrayed nervous energy, but his eyes, red from either exhaustion or fear, were watchful.

Mikael leaned forward, his voice measured. "You were the last person seen with Anna Karlsson before her death. Care to explain that?"

Emil rubbed his face with both hands, sighing deeply. "Look, I've already told you everything. I met her at the bar because she owed me money. That's it. I didn't kill her."

"You argued," Mikael pressed. "Witnesses saw you knock over your chair and storm out. Doesn't sound like a friendly chat to me."

Emil's face flushed. "Of course, I was upset! She promised me help with my career. She said she'd connect me to producers, even fund a demo. But instead, she blew all her money on booze and God knows what else. I felt like a fool for believing her."

"Then what?" Mikael's tone sharpened. "You got angry, followed her to her room, and things got out of hand?"

"No!" Emil's voice cracked. "I didn't follow her. I left the hotel and went home. Alone."

"Convenient," Mikael said dryly. "No one to vouch for your whereabouts."

Emil slammed his hand on the table. "I didn't kill her, okay? Anna was scared of someone. She kept saying she was being followed, that 'he' wouldn't leave her alone."

Mikael's pen paused mid-note. "Who was 'he'?"

"I don't know," Emil admitted, leaning back in his chair. "She didn't say. But she kept looking over her

shoulder like she was expecting someone to show up. Maybe it was Magnus something ...her ex."

Mikael raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think that?"

"She mentioned his name once. Said he was 'bad news' and that she didn't want anything to do with him. I got the feeling that he was the short of man who doesn't like no for an answer."

Mikael exchanged a glance with his partner, Anders, who stood by the door. Anders gave a subtle nod, indicating they had what they needed for now.

"We'll check your story, Emil," Mikael said, standing. "If you're lying, we'll know."

Back in his office, Mikael found Alma waiting, her face etched with concern.

"You look like you need food and sleep urgently," she said softly, handing him a thermos of coffee.

"Because I haven't had either," Mikael replied nervously, sitting heavily in his chair. Then seen her face he quickly added, "sorry hon, I'm just tired and frustrated. Emil claims Anna was being stalked by someone she called 'him.' Could be Magnus Ekström, her ex-husband?"

Alma nodded. “Magnus was controlling, manipulative. He drained her bank accounts, left her with nothing, and disappeared. But…” She hesitated.

“But what?” Mikael prompted.

“I heard from one of Anna’s old colleagues this morning. Apparently, Magnus resurfaced recently, asking about Anna. It’s not hard to imagine him trying to worm his way back into her life.”

Mikael’s jaw tightened. “If he’s our ‘him,’ then we need to find him. Anders is already running a trace on his last known whereabouts.”

Alma hesitated again, then added, “There’s something else you should know. Anna wasn’t just a victim of bad relationships. She made choices that… that put her in danger. After Magnus, she spiralled. The drinking, the men ...it was her way of coping, but it also attracted the wrong kind of attention.”

“Younger men...” Mikael whispered, scribbling notes. “And Emil claimed she owed him money. How deep was she in?”

Alma’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Deeper than I realized. She’d pawned her jewellery, sold her remaining properties, and still couldn’t stay afloat. She was desperate.”

5.

That afternoon, Anders burst into Mikael's office with a printout in hand.

"Got a hit on Magnus Ekström," Anders announced. "He's been living in Stockholm for the past two years. Runs a small import business now, but it's barely scraping by. He's also got a record. Assault charges from last year. Guess who filed the complaint?"

"Anna," Mikael said grimly.

"Bingo. She dropped the charges a week later, though."

"Find him," Mikael ordered. "I want him in custody by tonight."

While Anders coordinated the search, Mikael focused on another lead: the scarf found in Anna's room. It had been torn during the struggle, but its unique design, a blend of crimson and gold silk suggested it wasn't a generic item.

A couple of telephone calls and the owner of a boutique in Stockholm, *La Couture Luxe*, confirmed that the scarf was part of a limited collection sold exclusively to VIP clients. Only three scarves of that design had been sold in the last six months.

Mikael remained silent for a bit on the other side of the telephone line.

"Inspector Hansson, I'll help however I can," Isabella Lind, the owner of the boutique said, her tone professional.

"Do you have records of the buyers for this scarf?" Mikael asked,

Isabella seemed quiet for a bit "Yes, I remember this piece. It's quite distinct. It's a special design from a French designer, a special present for me. Let me check." She sounded like moving around, opening draws, moving her chair but returned just a few minutes later.

"There were three buyers," Isabella explained, showing Mikael the records. "One was a lawyer in Gothenburg, the second a retired diplomat in Malmö, and the third…" She paused, frowning.

"Who was the third?" Mikael pressed.

"Anna Karlsson," Isabella said. "She bought it two months ago."

Mikael's brow furrowed. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. She came in herself. I remember because she mentioned how much she loved this particular shade, it reminded her of a costume she wore in one of her operas."

* * * * *

Back at the station, Mikael pieced together the information. If the scarf was Anna's, then its presence at the crime scene wasn't surprising. But it still didn't explain how it ended up torn—or if it played a direct role in her murder.

As he mulled over the details, Anders walked in, a grim expression on his face.

"We found Magnus Ekström," Anders said. "But you're not going to like this."

"Why?"

"He's got an alibi. Solid one. He was in a hospital in Stockholm all of last night, recovering from surgery. He's not our guy."

Mikael leaned back, frustrated. "Then we're back to square one."

"Not quite," Anders said, handing over a file. "Magnus admitted he was trying to contact Anna, but not for reconciliation. He said she'd been blackmailing him—threatening to go public with some dirt on his business if he didn't pay her off."

Mikael's mind raced. "Blackmail, threats, unpaid debts… Anna wasn't just a victim. She was playing a dangerous game."

And it had cost her everything.

Late that night, Mikael sat alone in his office, staring at the fragment of paper found in Anna's hand. The partially visible phone number taunted him, the word *danger* etched into the fibres like a warning.

Who had written it? Who was Anna trying to warn herself about in her final moments?

6.

The morning air inside the police station was thick with tension as Mikael Hansson reviewed the latest evidence. The bank statements spread across his desk painted a troubling picture of Anna Karlsson's life. For over a year, she had been withdrawing large sums of cash at irregular intervals—amounts that, taken together, suggested a desperate attempt to keep someone quiet.

Alma sat across from him, arms crossed. She had insisted on being part of this stage of the investigation, and Mikael had reluctantly allowed it. She was her best friend and his best source of inside information after all.

"Look at these," he said, pointing to the records. "Fifty thousand kronor here, seventy thousand there. The withdrawals are spaced weeks apart, sometimes less. What do you make of it?"

Alma leaned in, her brow furrowing. "It looks like blackmail. And those sums…she must have been terrified."

Mikael nodded, flipping through the statements. "It gets worse. These started shortly after her divorce from Magnus Ekström. If he wasn't extorting her himself, then someone else was using her connection to him as leverage."

Alma hesitated, her voice low. "You know, Anna mentioned something during dinner the other night. She said, 'Some sins can't be forgiven.' At the time, I thought she was being dramatic. But now…"

Mikael's eyes narrowed. "Did she say something...?"

"No, but her tone was strange. Regretful. I thought it was about her drinking or maybe her string of bad relationships, but what if it was something bigger?"

A knock on the door interrupted them. Anders stepped in, holding a small evidence bag. Inside was a crumpled note, its writing jagged and uneven.

"Found this in Anna's luggage," Anders said, placing the bag on the desk. "Unsigned. It says, *'Pay up, or everyone finds out who you really are.'*"

Alma's face went pale as she stared at the note. "That handwriting…" She trailed off, shaking her head.

"What about it?" Mikael asked, studying her.

"It looks familiar," she said hesitantly. "I'm not certain, but it could be Magnus's. He always had that sharp, slanted style when he wrote in a hurry. But I haven't seen his writing in years."

Mikael exchanged a glance with Anders. "We'll need to verify that. If it *is* Magnus, it could be the break we need."

Later that afternoon, Mikael and Anders arrived at Emil Nyström's apartment, a small, cluttered space that smelled faintly of stale beer. Emil opened the door cautiously, his face pale and drawn.

"What now?" Emil asked, his voice a mixture of irritation and anxiety.

"We have more questions," Mikael said. "May we come in?"

Reluctantly, Emil stepped aside. Inside, the apartment was a mess, half-empty bottles on the table, clothes strewn across the floor. Emil slumped onto the couch, running a hand through his dishevelled hair.

"Look, I already told you everything I know," Emil began.

"Then tell us again," Mikael said, his tone firm. "Anna was being blackmailed. Did she mention anything about it to you?"

Emil's head snapped up, his eyes wide. "Blackmailed? No. She never said anything like that."

"What about her ex-husband, Magnus?" Anders asked. "Do you know if they were in contact recently?"

Emil hesitated, his foot tapping nervously. "I don't know. She didn't talk about him much, just said he was trouble. Honestly, I didn't ask. Anna wasn't exactly forthcoming about her past."

"What about the night of her murder?" Mikael pressed. "Did you see or hear anything unusual?"

"I already told you, I left after our argument." Emil's voice grew defensive. "I didn't follow her. I went straight home."

Mikael leaned in, his gaze piercing. "Did you? Because if you were lying before, now's the time to come clean. We found a blackmail note in her be-

longings. If you know something, and you're keeping it to yourself, you could be next."

Emil's face turned ashen. "Next? What do you mean?"

Before Mikael could respond, a loud crash came from the hallway outside. Emil shot to his feet, his eyes darting toward the door.

"What the hell was that?" he whispered.

Mikael and Anders drew their weapons as another crash echoed through the apartment. Mikael signalled for Anders to open the door.

The hallway was empty, but the sound of hurried footsteps receding down the stairs suggested someone had been there. Emil stood frozen in the doorway, his face pale with fear.

"They found me," he muttered.

"Who?" Mikael demanded, grabbing Emil by the shoulders. "Who are you afraid of?"

"I don't know!" Emil stammered, his voice cracking. "I don't know who they are. But someone's been watching me. I feel it. Ever since that night."

"Since the night Anna was killed?" Mikael asked sharply.

"Yes!" Emil cried. "I didn't think much of it at first, but now…now I think I saw something I wasn't supposed to see."

"What did you see?"

Emil opened his mouth to answer, but the sound of a phone vibrating cut him off. He fumbled for his phone, glancing at the screen before shoving it into his pocket.

"I need to go," Emil said, his voice trembling. "I can't talk anymore. I've said too much already."

Mikael stepped in front of him, blocking the way. "You're not going anywhere until you tell us what you know."

"I can't," Emil whispered, his eyes darting nervously. "You don't understand ...they'll kill me."

7.

Back at the station, Mikael replayed the encounter in his mind. Emil was clearly terrified, but of what or whom, remained unclear.

Alma was waiting for him in his office, her expression troubled.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Emil's hiding something," Mikael said, slumping into his chair. "He claims he's being watched and that he saw something the night Anna died. But he's too scared to talk."

Alma bit her lip, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. "Do you think he's in danger?"

"I think everyone involved in this case is in danger," Mikael admitted. "Anna was playing a dangerous game, and Emil might have stumbled into it without realizing."

Alma's gaze dropped to the floor. "There's something else I've been thinking about. When Anna talked about 'sins that can't be forgiven,' she wasn't just being melodramatic. She was hiding something. Something big."

Mikael studied her carefully. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying that Anna wasn't just a victim. She had secrets. Secrets someone was willing to kill her to protect."

Mikael's phone buzzed on the desk. It was Anders.

"We've got something," Anders said. "Forensics matched the handwriting on the blackmail note. It's not Magnus's, but it does match a sample from someone else in Anna's circle."

"Who?" Mikael asked, his pulse quickening.

"Her former manager," Anders replied. "Jonas Holmberg."

Mikael's grip tightened on the phone. Jonas Holmberg had managed Anna's career for over a decade before she fired him abruptly two years ago. At the time, rumours swirled about financial mismanagement and personal betrayal, but nothing was ever proven.

"Bring him in," Mikael said.

* * * * *

That night, as Mikael sifted through Holmberg's file, Alma sat quietly nearby, her thoughts clearly elsewhere.

"What's on your mind?" Mikael asked.

"Anna trusted Jonas," Alma said softly. "If he betrayed her, it must have cut deeper than anything Magnus ever did. But it doesn't make sense. Why would Jonas blackmail her? He already had access to her money when they worked together."

"Maybe she found out something she wasn't supposed to," Mikael suggested. "Maybe Jonas had secrets of his own."

Alma nodded, but her expression remained troubled. "Be careful, Mikael. Whoever killed Anna isn't

finished. And if Jonas is involved, he won't go down without a fight."

Mikael met her gaze, his resolve hardening. "I'll find the truth, Alma. No matter what it takes."

As the clock struck midnight, the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. But Mikael knew the game wasn't over yet. The web of secrets surrounding Anna Karlsson's death was more tangled than ever and somewhere in the shadows, the killer was waiting to strike again.

8.

The interrogation room felt colder than usual, the air thick with tension. Mikael sat opposite Jonas Holmberg, a man who oozed arrogance even when faced with the possibility of imprisonment. Viklund, despite his silver hair, still held a certain Hollywood-style glamour, his eyes narrowed with a practiced disdain for the proceedings.

"Mr. Viklund," Mikael began, his voice a low rumble, "we believe you may have some information regarding the blackmail threats received by Ms Karlsson."

Viklund scoffed, adjusting his perfectly tailored suit. "Blackmail? Preposterous. Anna's a tempest in a teapot. Always been. Drama queen. Besides," he added with a smirk, "I'm a bit too busy these days to be dabbling in such… amateurish endeavours."

"Busy with what, Mr Holmberg?" Anders interjected, his voice firm. "Your 'investments' perhaps?"

Viklund bristled. "My affairs are none of your concern, Polisinspektör. I suggest you stick to the facts."

"The facts, Mr Holmberg," Mikael countered, leaning forward, "include the fact that the handwriting on the blackmail note matches a sample from your file. A very distinctive handwriting, I might add."

Holmberg waved a dismissive hand. "Coincidence, I suppose. Or perhaps some disgruntled former employee of mine. I have a lot of those, you know. People who couldn't handle my… direct approach." He paused, a sly glint in his eye. "Though I must admit, the idea of someone imitating my handwriting is rather… flattering, isn't it?"

Mikael ignored the taunt. "We have evidence suggesting you were experiencing financial difficulties around the time Ms Karlsson terminated your contract."

Holmberg leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs. "Financial difficulties? Such a dramatic term. Let's just say… my investments weren't as fruitful as I'd hoped. A minor setback, easily rectified."

"Easily rectified with a significant sum of money?" Mikael pressed.

Holmberg chuckled, a low, amused sound. "Polisinspektör Hansson, I'm a man of principle. I would never resort to such… underhanded tactics. Besides," he added, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, "Anna's… connections. Let's just say, she has ways of making things… disappear."

Mikael raised an eyebrow. "Are you suggesting Ms Karlsson is involved in something illegal?"

Holmberg shrugged, a careless gesture. "I'm merely stating the obvious. People in her position… they have their methods. Powerful people. Messy people. Her ex-husband..."

The interrogation continued for hours, but Holmberg remained unyielding. He denied any involvement, his arrogance a shield against the mounting evidence. He even presented an alibi, claiming to have been at a charity gala the night the first blackmail note was delivered.

"I can provide you with a list of witnesses," Holmberg said, a smug smile playing on his lips. "Prominent figures, all of whom can attest to my presence

at the event … the crème de la crème of the Swedish aristocracy. Surely, they won't lie for me."

Disappointment washed over Mikael. The trail had gone cold. Holmberg, despite his obvious disdain for Anna and his potential motive, seemed to have an airtight alibi.

"Thank you for your time, Mr Holmberg," Mikael said, his voice flat. "We'll be in touch."

As Holmberg was escorted out of the room, Mikael couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right. Holmberg's arrogance, his practiced nonchalance, it all felt… too perfect.

"What do you think, Anders?" Mikael asked, rubbing his temples.

Anders frowned. "He's playing a game, Mikael. He's enjoying this. And that alibi… it's too convenient. Too perfect."

Mikael nodded in agreement. "Still we are back to the same point. The same name, the same man. Magnus Ekström."

"He has an alibi..." Anders murmured angrily. "A solid one. A surgery by Dr Alfred Mellberg. I spoke

with him and he said that he was in the clinic all night and the next day."

"Heart transplant?" Mikael's voice was full of depression and sarcasm.

"Alfred doing a heart transplant?" The female voice and the deep laugh that followed made them both turn back and face a young police-woman neither one had seen before.

"Sorry Sirs... Sorry... sorry..."

"Do you know Dr Alfred Mellberg officer?" Mikael asked looking a bit aggravated.

"I know him, my cat knows him. He's a vet. Makes surgeries as well but to ...dogs and cats sirs. He has a small clinic just outside Växjö, sirs!"

And for the first time this day Mikael and Alfred smiled.

Three hours later Dr Alfred Mellberg had admitted that when he talked with Alfred he was talking about Mr Magnus Ekström dog. A stray dog he had found in the parking lot of the hotel he was staying and he thought that it needed medical help.

Now Mikael and Alfred were really smiling.

9.

Mikael Hansson leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing as he studied Magnus Ekström across the interrogation table. The man sat with an air of indifference, his tailored suit immaculate, his polished shoes reflecting the sterile light of the room.

Magnus smirked, adjusting his cufflinks as if the questioning were a minor inconvenience. “I’ve already told you, Inspector,” he said, his voice dripping with condescension. “I haven’t seen Anna in years. Our divorce was finalized ages ago. She’s not exactly someone I’d care to keep in touch with.”

Mikael’s jaw tightened. “Not even when she was being blackmailed?”

Magnus tilted his head, feigning confusion. “Blackmailed? Anna? What could anyone possibly want from her?”

Alma, seated behind the one-way glass observing the interview, clenched her fists. She knew Magnus's type all too well, a man used to controlling the narrative, convinced of his invincibility.

Mikael leaned forward, lowering his voice. "We've traced several large withdrawals from Anna's accounts around the time your own finances were in trouble. Care to explain?"

Magnus's confident façade cracked, a flicker of irritation crossing his face. "I have no idea what you're talking about. My finances are perfectly in order. Unlike Anna, I know how to manage money."

"Is that why you were photographed with Per Viklund?" Mikael asked, sliding a glossy image across the table.

Magnus's composure wavered as he glanced at the photograph. It showed him standing next to Per Viklund, the notorious nightclub owner and suspected criminal.

"I don't deny I've met the man," Magnus said carefully. "He's a businessman, and I've attended functions where he's been present. Is not my first time in Växjö you know, Polisinspektör. Still that doesn't mean I'm involved in anything illegal."

"And what about her?" Mikael pushed another photo forward. This one depicted Magnus with a young woman, her face partially obscured but recognizable to Mikael as Lina Holmqvist, a missing person from two years ago.

Magnus's eyes darkened. "This is absurd. I don't know that woman."

"Funny, because Anna had this photo hidden in her hotel room," Mikael countered. "Along with others linking you and Viklund to some very questionable activities. Care to explain why Anna might have been keeping these?"

Magnus leaned back, crossing his arms. "If Anna was hoarding incriminating evidence, maybe she was the one blackmailing *us*. Ever think of that, Inspector?"

The room fell silent, the weight of Magnus's words settling in.

In the observation room, Alma's pulse quickened. "He's lying," she muttered to herself. "He's too calm."

But Magnus wasn't entirely wrong, Mikael thought. Anna had secrets, secrets she was willing to protect at any cost. The safe hidden in her hotel room was proof enough of that.

Later, Mikael reconvened with his team in the conference room. Anders spread the photographs across the table, alongside copies of Anna's bank records and notes from Magnus's interview.

"This is getting murkier by the second," Anders said. "If Anna was blackmailing Magnus and Viklund, why didn't she just go to the police with this evidence?"

"Because she wasn't innocent either," Mikael replied grimly. "Whatever Anna was involved in, it wasn't just about money. There's more to this, and we're missing a crucial piece."

His phone buzzed. Picking it up, he saw Alma's name on the screen.

"You need to come home," she said, her voice trembling. "Something's happened."

* * * * *

When Mikael arrived, Alma was pacing the living room, a crumpled piece of paper in her hand. She handed it to him without a word.

The note was simple but chilling: *"Stay out of Anna's business, or you'll end up like her."*

Mikael's blood ran cold. "When did this arrive?"

"About an hour ago," Alma said. "It was slid under the door. I didn't see who left it."

Mikael's mind raced. "This confirms we're on the right track. Whoever killed Anna knows we're closing in."

"Or they're trying to scare us off," Alma said. "But I'm not backing down, Mikael. Anna was my friend, and she deserves justice."

Mikael placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "I won't let anything happen to you. But you have to let me handle this. Promise me you won't get involved."

Alma hesitated but finally nodded.

10.

The next day, Mikael and Anders arrived at Per Viklund's nightclub, *Elysium*. The gaudy neon lights outside the entrance clashed with the dark rumours surrounding its owner. Inside, the pulsing music and flashing lights did little to mask the tension in the air.

A bouncer led them to a private room where Per Viklund was waiting. Dressed in a black suit with a snake-like smile, Viklund exuded an aura of menace.

"Polisinspektör," Viklund said smoothly, gesturing for them to sit. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We're investigating the murder of Anna Karlsson," Mikael said bluntly. "You knew her, didn't you?"

Viklund's smile didn't waver. "I meet a lot of people in my line of work. But yes, I knew Anna. A lovely woman, though…troubled."

"Troubled enough to blackmail you and Magnus Ekström?" Anders asked, his tone sharp.

Viklund chuckled, leaning back in his chair. "Blackmail? That's a strong accusation. Anna and I had…an arrangement. She provided me with certain information, and I compensated her for it. That's all."

"What kind of information?" Mikael pressed.

Viklund's eyes gleamed. "That's confidential, I'm afraid. But I can assure you, it had nothing to do with her death."

"And Lina Holmqvist?" Mikael asked, watching Viklund's reaction carefully.

For the first time, the nightclub owner's smile faltered. "Lina? What does she have to do with this?"

"She's in one of the photographs Anna kept hidden," Mikael said. "The same Lina who went missing two years ago."

Viklund's expression hardened. "I don't know where Lina is, and I had nothing to do with her disappearance."

"Then why did Anna keep your photo with her?" Anders asked.

Viklund shrugged, but his gaze shifted. "I can't speak for Anna's motives. But if you're suggesting I had something to do with her death, you're wasting your time."

"Am I?" Mikael said, standing up. "Because right now, you're looking like a man with plenty to hide."

As they left the nightclub, Mikael couldn't shake the feeling that Viklund knew more than he was letting on.

That evening, Mikael sat at his desk, piecing together the evidence. The photographs, the bank records, the blackmail note. It all pointed to a dangerous web of secrets and lies. But the truth remained just out of reach.

Alma entered the room, her expression determined. "I've been thinking," she said. "Anna once mentioned a safe house she used to escape from Magnus during their divorce. Maybe there's something there, something she left behind."

Mikael considered her words. "Do you remember where it was?"

"Yes," Alma said. "It's an old cabin by the lake. She called it her sanctuary."

Mikael stood up, grabbing his coat. “Let’s go.”

* * * * *

The cabin was isolated and shrouded in darkness, the only sound the rustling of leaves in the wind. Mikael and Alma stepped inside, their flashlights cutting through the gloom.

The air was heavy with dust, and the furniture was covered in white sheets. Alma pointed to a cabinet in the corner. “She always kept important things hidden there.”

Mikael opened the cabinet, his heart racing as he found a small locked box. Inside were more photographs, a notebook filled with cryptic entries, and a key.

“What’s this?” Alma whispered, peering over his shoulder.

Mikael flipped through the notebook. The entries detailed meetings, payments, and threats, evidence that Anna had been deeply entangled in a criminal network.

But one name stood out among the rest: *Per Viklund*.

"This is it," Mikael said. "This is what they killed her for."

As they left the cabin, Mikael knew the final act was about to begin. The web of deception was unravelling, and the killer was closer than ever.

11.

The sun dipped below the horizon, casting Växjö in a shroud of early evening darkness. At the police station, Mikael Hansson stared at the raid warrant in his hands. It felt heavy with more than just its legal weight. It was the culmination of everything they had uncovered about Anna Karlsson's life and death.

"Are we ready?" Anders asked, his face tense.

Mikael nodded. "Let's bring this to an end."

The convoy of police vehicles approached *Elysium*, the garish lights of the nightclub flickering like a beacon of corruption. Officers moved swiftly, blocking exits and securing the perimeter. Inside, patrons froze mid-dance as the police stormed through, their authoritative shouts cutting through the pulsing music.

Mikael and Anders headed straight for the VIP section. Per Viklund was seated in his private booth, a glass of champagne in hand. His smug expression didn't falter as the officers closed in.

"Well, well," Viklund said, setting his glass down. "I was wondering when you'd make an appearance, Polisinspektör."

"Per Viklund, you're under arrest for conspiracy, blackmail, and obstruction of justice," Mikael said, his tone cold.

Viklund chuckled as the officers handcuffed him. "I assume this is about Anna?"

"You don't get to ask questions," Anders snapped.

As they escorted Viklund out, Mikael spotted a file folder on the table. He grabbed it, flipping through its contents: transaction records, photographs, and correspondence. The evidence painted a chilling picture of a trafficking ring operating under the guise of nightclub business deals.

One letter, marked with Magnus Ekström's initials, stood out. It was curt but damning: *"If she doesn't stop, I will make sure she does."*

Mikael's heart pounded. They finally had the proof.

Back at headquarters, Mikael and Anders interrogated Viklund.

"Anna knew everything, didn't she?" Mikael asked, his voice low and steady.

Viklund leaned back in his chair, his calm veneer cracking. "She was smarter than she looked, I'll give her that. She figured out the operation, found the names, the accounts. At first, she just wanted a cut. But then she got greedy."

"Greedy?" Anders interjected. "She was blackmailing you to protect herself from people like you."

Viklund shrugged. "Maybe. But you don't understand ...Magnus was the real danger. I told him to let it go, to pay her off and move on. But he...he couldn't handle it. Said she was ruining his life."

"Are you saying Magnus killed her?" Mikael pressed.

"I'm saying he wanted her gone," Viklund replied. "Whether he did it himself or paid someone, I don't know. But trust me, Polisinspektör, I wasn't the one who strangled her."

As soon as Viklund's confession was logged, Mikael ordered surveillance on Magnus Ekström. But it was already too late. When officers arrived at Magnus's hotel room, it was empty. The place had been hastily abandoned, his car missing from the driveway.

Mikael clenched his fists. "He's running."

Anders nodded grimly. "Where would he go?"

Alma's voice cut through their thoughts as she entered the room, a determined look on her face. "The Konserthus," she said.

"The Konserthus?" Mikael echoed.

"Anna's favourite place," Alma explained. "If he's desperate, he might go there. It's symbolic, isn't it? Her last performance, their shared history—it all ties back to that stage."

Mikael grabbed his coat. "Let's move."

12.

The grand Växjö opera house loomed in the night, its ornate façade bathed in shadow. Mikael and his team entered cautiously, their footsteps echoing in the vast, empty space.

"Spread out," Mikael instructed.

The search was methodical, but it didn't take long to find Magnus. He was on the stage, pacing like a man on the edge of sanity. A gun glinted in his hand.

"Magnus!" Mikael called, stepping into the light.

Magnus whirled around, his face a mixture of anger and despair. "Stay back, Polisinspektör," he warned.

"You don't have to do this," Mikael said, his voice calm but firm.

Magnus laughed bitterly. "Don't I? My life is over, thanks to her. Anna ruined everything. She bled me dry, humiliated me, and now…now she's destroyed me even in death."

"She didn't force you into crime," Mikael countered. "You made those choices."

"She gave me no choice!" Magnus shouted, his voice echoing through the empty theatre. "Do you know what it's like to be trapped? To see everything you've built crumble because of one vindictive woman?"

As Magnus ranted, Anders and another officer moved silently along the edges of the stage, positioning themselves to disarm him.

"You killed her," Mikael said, taking a step closer.

Magnus's eyes filled with tears. "I didn't mean to. I just wanted her to stop. But she wouldn't. She just laughed at me, said she'd expose everything. I..." He choked on his words, raising the gun to his temple.

"No!" Mikael shouted. "Magnus, put the gun down. You can still make this right."

Magnus shook his head, a sad smile on his lips.

"There's nothing left to make right, Inspector. This is the finale Anna always wanted. A tragic ending."

Before anyone could stop him, Magnus pulled the trigger. The sound reverberated through the opera house, a grim punctuation to his final act.

* * * * *

"Magnus's confession doesn't explain everything," Mikael said to Alma later that evening.

"What do you mean?" Alma asked.

"Why didn't Anna go to the police with what she had on Magnus and Viklund? She had enough evidence to shut them down."

Alma frowned. "Maybe she didn't trust the system. Or maybe she was protecting someone."

Mikael's eyes narrowed. "Protecting someone…"

The next morning, Alma went through Anna's belongings again. In her jewellery box, she found a hidden compartment. Inside was a small diary, its pages filled with Anna's looping handwriting.

One passage caught her eye:

"I made mistakes, so many mistakes. I thought I could escape, but the past always finds a way to catch up. Magnus wasn't the only monster I knew. There are worse things out there—things I dare not write, even here."

Alma closed the diary, her heart heavy. Anna's life had been a tragic opera indeed, filled with secrets and shadows. And while justice had been served, the haunting melody of her story would linger forever.

THE END

Växjö's silent aria

Thanos Kalamidas

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VÄXJÖ'S SILENT ARIA

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THANOS KALAMIDAS